

Remarks of Lt. Governor Becky Skillman at the Indiana Rural Health Association Public Policy Forum January 19, 2010

I was last with the Rural Health Association in 2006, so I'm long overdue for a visit. A lot has happened since then. Your former IRHA Director, Shawna Girgis, is now the Mayor of Bedford – my hometown.

And Indiana's health care has, by any estimation, improved a lot since 2006. And I'm pleased to share with you, what the state is doing to help you help Hoosiers stay healthy – whether they live in big cities or small towns.

RURAL AFFAIRS

It's always been my desire to see our entire state prosper. It's a dangerous mentality to separate urban and rural, essentially creating a state of "haves" and "have-nots," where some communities are valued more than others. We cannot move forward that way. That's the chief reason I created the state's first -ever Office of Community and Rural Affairs in when we came to office in 2005.

Helping our small cities and towns thrive and grow is one of my passions, and that passion developed out of necessity, quite frankly. During my 12 years in the Indiana Senate, I represented five rural counties, in south central Indiana. And I grew up understanding the disparities that have existed for so long between big city and small town.

I realized then that we need to be innovative and creative, to think of new ways to move forward and raise our expectations for our rural cities, towns and counties. And today, I consider it a personal responsibility to work to ensure that we truly serve the needs of the 75 percent of our state that's considered rural.

Unfortunately, one of the most obvious areas where we can see the "urban/have, rural/have not" situation, is in our health care system. America boasts the best health care in the world, and Indiana has one of the best systems in America. But if you are a rural Hoosier, chances are you'll have a long drive to get to a doctor or a hospital. Or, you'll be faced with missed work or sick days for appointments that our urban citizens could take care of in an afternoon.

I want to thank the Rural Health Association for all you do to bridge the gap. Whether you're working with legislators or equipping critical access hospitals, you're serving Hoosiers in a unique and invaluable way. We need you out there, and I appreciate all you do for our state.

I'm encouraged by the positive programs that are helping recruit and train providers to live and work in rural settings. The Lugar Center for Rural Health, at Union Hospital in Terre Haute, is a perfect example of that. Their Family Medicine Residency Program

prepares doctors for rural health care and the challenges they'll face. They must deal with distance and the relative isolation of a rural doctor with limited access to specialists and major facilities.

And I want to compliment the work your association is doing through the Statewide Rural Health Network. Networking our Critical Access Hospitals is moving our whole state forward. Sharing resources and knowledge – and even working together to build group purchasing power – these are important steps to bringing world class health care to every corner of the state.

STATE HEALTH CARE PROGRAMS

As your partners in that effort, we've created state health care programs that provide for some of the most vulnerable Hoosiers. Whether they are experiencing poverty, whether they are elderly or very young, pregnant women, or single mothers, we have programs that are providing basic health care services where they're most needed.

Hoosier Healthwise is one of the best programs in the nation for low-income children and pregnant women. About 630 thousand Hoosiers benefit from this program. And we're continually pushing for our health services to be smarter and more efficient.

Since we created the new Healthy Indiana Plan in 2007 –it has been a great success. HIP is now protecting just shy of 50,000 uninsured, low income Hoosiers. This program is not an entitlement. It's a partnership. State government works with individual Hoosiers to help cover the cost of basic health services.

We also have programs in place to help Hoosiers GET healthy and STAY healthy. INShape Indiana has nearly become a household name. It's a part of our ongoing efforts to promote good health for Hoosiers.

Since 2005, Hoosiers have been able to log onto the INShape website to get the encouragement they need to eat better, move more, and avoid tobacco. We actively communicate with 86,000 Hoosiers in all 92 counties, through the Website, Facebook, and Twitter. And we partner with large organizations, like the State Fair, Anthem, Clarian Health, Red Gold, and Kroger, to help get the word out.

We're also working on the Indiana Healthy WEIGHT Initiative. This program was established in 2008, to develop a state plan for obesity prevention – and we expect that plan to be complete by the middle of this year.

We want Hoosiers to have more opportunities to eat right and stay active - and to deal with serious challenges, like lifestyle changes and even chronic disease. The initiative is looking at specific areas – from the health care system to the involvement of local communities – then we'll identify where we can do better, and give more Hoosiers the opportunity to get their health in check. Speakers will be available, and of course, an informative website, www.inhealthyweight.org.

These programs are not meant to be comprehensive, providing EVERY need for EVERY Hoosier. We're seeking to protect the most vulnerable and help prevent health problems before they start.

I think it's dangerous to apply a "government fix" mentality to the health care issues being debated today. There are solutions to the problems we face. However, we have serious concern with the bill being debated right now in Congress, and how it impacts the programs and progress we've established here in Indiana.

Depending of course, on what kind of reform passes, state government would likely assume more of the burden for programs that leverage Medicare and Medicaid. That will mean even more budget challenges.

But in the mean time, we have some effective sustainable programs serving Hoosiers, and it's our responsibility here and now to improve them continually.

TELEMEDICINE

One of our best resources to improve health care is technology. Modern technology is constantly evolving into something smaller, faster, and more efficient. And that evolution is the future of health services. Health Information Technology is a tremendous tool to improve the excellent care our hospitals and doctors already provide.

Once again, Indiana finds itself at the forefront of this technology. A growing number of hospitals across the state can access each other's patient information electronically. Which is putting us far ahead of the rest of the nation.

I've been impressed with the ongoing work of the Lugar Center, which has been a pioneer in promoting telemedicine with its Rural Consult program. Telemedicine allows for diagnostics, such as X-Rays, to be viewed by a radiologist on the other side of the state or world. It allows for doctors far away to see patients using specialized cameras and tools.

Telemedicine is one of the best chances we have to meet Indiana's rural health care needs. The benefits are enormous, however, there's an ongoing issue with the deployment of broadband in rural communities. Broadband is the best, most reliable way to get health information from point A to point B. And it's been our goal in state government, for some time now, to get every city and town online.

In the past, we've hosted Rural Broadband conferences through our Office of Rural and Community Affairs. And we're continuing to work on deploying broadband statewide, through programs like Bring IT Home Indiana. It's geared toward getting Hoosiers comfortable with technology, and ready to use what's fast becoming available to them.

But, as I said, the cost and low return on investment for rural broadband is a big hurdle we have to jump. We've made a lot of progress with the FCC's Rural Health Care Pilot Program. With your help, we've been able to combine federal grant money with funding

from our Office of Community and Rural Affairs, for the construction and administration of the program.

In the next few months the final bids will be turned in. The hospitals serving as home base for broadband in their communities, will make the final decisions, and start moving toward better connectivity.

I know there can be growing pains with any new system. Three years ago, we improved our computer systems at the BMV. All anyone wanted to talk about was what a pain it was to change. But just months later, Indiana's BMV was winning national awards for efficiency and customer service.

FEDERAL HIT FUNDING

As you know, there are federal grant opportunities for hospitals in health information technology.

Two major HIT programs have been created recently. Both are competitive grants, and one is open to state governments only. We've wasted no time going after the state Health Information Exchange grants. This program essentially opens the door for state discretion, giving the state a lump sum to be distributed as needed. Federal funding decisions won't be made for several more months, but we know that the awards will be anywhere between 4 and 40 million dollars.

We'll be able to use those grant dollars to develop statewide directories of patients, providers and services. And we can provide standards and accountability, and help with technical operations.

The second big HIT program allows individual hospitals to compete for federal grants themselves. Over the next four years, nearly 600 million dollars will be available nationwide through the HIT Extension Program.

For a lot of Indiana hospitals – especially critical access hospitals – this kind of funding would provide a tremendous boost to patient care. It would be another important tool to get the best health care in the world into even the smallest communities.

CONCLUSION

I am confident we can make these programs work to our best advantage. Indiana's in as good a place as we could hope, in these uncertain times. But we all want it to be better.

I want to thank you for the services YOU provide every day, and for the meaningful way you are contributing to the quality of life in our state.

The Rural Health Association has long stood for the values and vision of Hoosiers in rural areas. And I look forward to the progress we'll make together, as a state in the coming year.

Thanks for all you do, and thanks for having me today.